



LOVE (OR AT LEAST STOP HATING) THY NEIGHBOR

Live next door to a privacy invader, a partyer, a junk collector? Your frustration ends now, with this nip-it-in-the-bud guide.

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ever

pull into your driveway, see your neighbor walking to his car, and pretend to check your phone so you don't have to chat? Instead, smile, wave, and make a quick exit, say the experts. That three-second gesture creates goodwill, which comes in handy when you're forced to interact—whether you need a favor or have a dispute. “It’s always easier to resolve issues when you have an ongoing relationship,” says psychologist Dan Christie, Ph.D., a conflict-resolution specialist. With that friendly foundation established, try these strategies for addressing common conflicts.

YOU’VE GOT NO PRIVACY

You want to have a cup of coffee on your deck, but—*Oh, hi*—there’s your neighbor 10 feet away, pruning his roses again.

ACTION PLAN: You can control only what happens on your side of the fence, says Whitney LaCosta, a New York real estate broker. No fence? Put one up. Or plant shrubs or trees, or at least position some

pots, to obscure the view. This is the only way to get the solitude that you want. If you plan to put up a fence, talk with the neighbors about when and where it’s going. Refer to your survey and theirs (the maps delineating your lots’ boundaries) before putting anything along the property line.

SAMPLE SCRIPT: “Hey, I wanted to give you a heads-up that we’re putting in a fence. You must be tired of seeing me out here every day! We’re getting an estimate soon, so we should both go over our surveys together to be clear on the property line.”

WHAT SURVEY? Yours is probably stored with your home’s closing papers. If not, try city hall. Many towns keep them on file.

THEY USE YOUR CURB AS A PARKING LOT

They leave their cars in front of your house, while their driveway remains inexplicably clear.

ACTION PLAN: Separate the problem from your neighbor. He isn’t the issue; the parking situation is. Then you can approach it as though you’re on the same team. “Parties with the most success in conflict resolution have a collaborative attitude,” says Christie. Because many towns allow parking anywhere on a public street, there’s probably no legal infraction here, so your best bet is to couch it as a safety issue.

SAMPLE SCRIPT: “Hey! You couldn’t have known this, but when I’m backing down my driveway, I can’t see up the street because of where the cars are parked. Do you think you could park in front of your house instead, and keep that part of the street clear?”

THE EXPERTS

BOB BORZOTTA, author of *Neighbors From Hell* and founder of neighborsfromhell.com.

DAN CHRISTIE, Ph.D., psychologist, professor emeritus at Ohio State University, and Fulbright scholar in conflict resolution.

DIANE GOTTSMAN, etiquette expert and owner of the Protocol School of Texas.

LINA GUILLEN, attorney and coauthor of *Neighbor Law: Fences, Trees, Boundaries & Noise*.

WHITNEY LACOSTA, real estate broker and owner of Coach Realty, on Long Island, in New York.

YOU GET NONSTOP POP-INS

The kids next door—and sometimes their parents—repeatedly drop by with zero notice. You sit down for dinner, for homework help, or just for the sake of sitting down, and the doorbell rings.

ACTION PLAN: Send a message by not inviting them in when they show up. It sounds harsh, but there are ways to do this gracefully. (See Sample Scripts.) “Unless you want to

be a pushover, you need to stay true to what works for you and your family. The neighbors will get over it,” says etiquette authority Diane Gottsman.

SAMPLE SCRIPTS:

IF THE PARENTS SHOW UP...

“Hi! I would invite you guys in, but we have a bunch of things to get done before dinner—homework, ugh, *amiright?* Let’s catch up another time soon!”

IF THE KID SHOWS UP...

“Hi, sweetie. Alex can’t play today, but we’ll figure out another time for you guys to hang out.”

EXTRA CREDIT FOR TEXTING THE MOM THIS:

“It was so nice of Jordan to stop by, but weeknights are tricky. Can we make a plan for the weekend?”

THEIR HOLIDAY DECORATIONS STAY UP TOO LONG

It’s March, and the tiny Christmas lights are still twinkling.

ACTION PLAN: Understand that unless there’s a home owners’ association rule pertaining to them, lingering holiday decorations are not something that you can be adamant about, says Gottsman. You could offer to help take down the lights when you’re out, say, cleaning your gutters, but keep in mind that this will probably be taken as an insult. So you may want to let the blinking lights lie. That said, if you have a chummy relationship, there’s a chance you can get away with nudging if you deliver it in a jokey way.

SAMPLE SCRIPT: “Hey! Getting a head start on next Christmas? Ha. But seriously, Alison, any chance of those lights coming down?”

It feels like you live next to a frat house

Too much noise! The neighbors blast music, let their dog howl, and mow the lawn at the crack of dawn.

ACTION PLAN: Legally speaking, “you can take them to court if the noise is enough of a nuisance that it interferes with your ability to enjoy your property or if it violates local laws regarding noise hours and decibel levels,” says attorney Lina Guillen. But ideally you can skip this if you talk to them in the right way at the right time. “Don’t go over there screaming at 2 A.M. in your slippers. Wait until the next day, keep calm, and avoid the word *you*,” says Christie. “It feels

accusatory and invites them to play the blame game, which may make both sides unwilling to budge.” Come at it from the assumption that they didn’t even realize their noise was affecting you (even if you’re pretty sure that they did). If all else fails and they don’t budge, you can send a certified letter (that can later be shown in court) describing how the noise affects your life, with copies of ordinances that they may be breaking. Sign off with “Please response by X date so we can fix this.” But hopefully a simple(r) conversation will do the trick.

SAMPLE SCRIPT: “Hi! I’m sure you didn’t realize this, but our walls are thin and we hear your music late at night, so it’s hard to sleep. Could you turn it down after, say, 9 P.M.?”

KEEP A LOG
Court is a last resort, but in case you end up there, start documenting the noisy infractions and recording them with your phone.



Their house looks run-down

Your neighbors have let it go, but you can't.

ACTION PLAN: Step back and try to understand what they might be going through. If it's really run-down, it may mean that they're not in good financial shape. "Very few bad neighbors are trying to be bad neighbors," says Bob Borzotta, a neighbor-issue consultant and author. Still, the peeling paint/crumbling roof/unkempt lawn could make your insurance rates go up and your house's value go down. You can check your town's upkeep laws and even make an anony-

mous call to the town department of inspections or code enforcement to step in and carry out the rules. Or, if the neighbors are elderly or infirm, you could send your kids over to offer their services if the issue requires a nontechnical fix, like raking leaves. Another alternative: Play the friendly-neighbor role and find a clever way to turn your fixation on this grievance into "just being helpful."

SAMPLE SCRIPT: "I got a great rate on a roof repair from my guy. My house really needed it. He's giving a neighborhood discount that you might be interested in. Do you want me to send him over?"



WHEN TO HOLD YOUR TONGUE
Not all conflicts warrant a confrontation. Find out when to let it go at realsimple.com/etiquette.

STAY STRONG
You may feel guilty fending off someone trying to connect. Don't. You have a right to set limits.

THE BLOCK GOSSIP ALWAYS CORNERS YOU

Your neighbor is like the office busybody, only instead of ambushing you at the elevator, she does it in your driveway.

ACTION PLAN: Turn her into a "Nice to see you! Gotta run!" kind of neighbor, says Gottsman. "The next time she approaches, let your body language show her that you're not taking the bait. Look her in the eye, say hi, then drop your gaze to focus on your phone or your hedges—or simply walk toward your front door with zeal so she gets the sense that you're not up for gossip." Once she realizes that you're no fun, she'll knock on someone else's door.

SAMPLE SCRIPT: "Thanks for the info, but I like to stay out of the fray. I'm sure you understand." Repeat each time until she gets the point.

THEY'RE HOGGING YOUR SPACE

The next-door neighbors are encroaching on your property. It could be a shed; it could be a fence; it could be a patch of ivy. But it can't be on your side of the line.

ACTION PLAN: Make sure that you have an up-to-date survey that specifies where your property ends and theirs begins, says LaCosta. Then consider the extent of the encroachment and whether a request for, say, a new fence or landscaping changes is worthwhile. This is a risky ask: A fix may be costly for them, and if they don't agree to it and you need to threaten legal action, you might not be able to handle the fees and the time involved in a court case. Unless the infringement is significant, you will probably be better off overlooking it. But you can still diplomatically bring it up to avoid future issues. Start with a compliment, then play the situation as if you were clueless.

SAMPLE SCRIPT: "I love your shed—we were thinking of getting one, too. And when we looked at the survey, we found out that your shed is partly on our property. We didn't know this, either. I'm just telling you so that the next time either of us builds or plants, we can check our surveys together."

